

Beluga issues aired

Interest groups weigh guidelines

By Doug O'harra
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After a decade of plummeting numbers, how many beluga whales actually remain in the ocean off Anchorage's coast? How can the depleted whales rebound? Will closely regulating an annual two-whale harvest by Alaska Native hunters be enough? Or must federal managers start looking at other human endeavors, too -- fishing, pollution sources, shipping, oil and gas development?

These critical questions were among issues raised Tuesday at the first day of a hearing on proposed regulations that would govern the beluga harvest in Cook Inlet over the next quarter century.

The hearing, in U.S. District Court before U.S. Coast Guard law Judge Parlen McKenna, drew the gamut of participants -- attorneys representing the National Marine Fisheries Service, the federal Marine Mammal Commission, environmental and industry groups, as well as the Village of Tyonek and Cook Inlet Treaty Tribes. Hunter Joel Blatchford and his wife, Debra, represented themselves and other local hunters with Eskimo heritage.

Marine mammal population expert Douglas DeMaster -- director of the National Marine Mammal Laboratory in Seattle -- spent most of the day on the stand explaining and defending the complex art and science of beluga population dynamics in Cook Inlet.

Through their questions and statements to the judge, the participants brought slightly different views of the proposed regulations. Some argued for more caution, some for more study, some that NMFS might even have overestimated the declines.

Blatchford, an Inupiat who grew up in Anchorage but hunted the whales with his father for decades, said he was for a "stand down" that would allow more time for research.

"I don't want to see something happen to them ... that would totally erase them," Blatchford told McKenna.

Attorneys representing local Dena'ina Athabaskan villages such as Tyonek, Knik and Eklutna emphasized the importance of maintaining the traditional hunt. Attorney David Voluck said it was important for the regulations to allow increases in the number of whales available for harvest.

"If we keep chasing the pot of gold and the rainbow keeps moving, then my clients -- the Native people of Cook Inlet -- are going to have their culture depressed ad infinitum," he said. "We should have an escape valve both ways."

Attorney Jack Sterne, representing the Center for Marine Conservation, said that NMFS must look at other factors beside hunting.

"We believe (NMFS) has unfairly shifted the burden for recovery on Alaska Native subsistence," Sterne said. "My clients think it's possible that the two strikes (per year) can work -- assuming that NMFS is taking other conservation measures."

Over the past decade, a population once thought to number up to 1,300 whales has crashed, and federal biologists blame hunting by Alaska Natives as main cause. The genetically isolated whales dropped to an estimated 347 in 1998 and 357 in 1999. Counts in the summer of 2000 appear to have found similar numbers, though a final population estimate probably won't be released until January.

Last spring, the federal agency listed the whales as depleted under the Marine Mammal Protection Act and this fall released two documents for public comment -- the harvest regulations and a draft environmental impact statement discussing the agency's scheme to rebuild the stock.

Under the regulations, beluga recovery in Cook Inlet would rely almost exclusively on restricting Native subsistence hunting to two whales. Other provisions would prohibit the sale of Cook Inlet beluga products, delay hunting until after July 15 to avoid calving season and prohibit harvesting newborn calves and cows with calves. NMFS projected that the whales could rebound to a sustainable population of 780 animals by 2025.